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DEMOCRACY SAFEGUARDS INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS, SAY AFGHANS

(Article on Afghan IV group's visit to the U.S.)

By Hailer Karzai

USIA Staff Writer

Washington -- A group of seven leading Afghans called their U.S. visit a "moving experience" on how democracy in America "protects the rights of individuals." The seven delegates, representing various political, cultural and medical associations of Afghan refugees in Pakistan said in an interview with USIA June 13 that they were "particularly impressed" by "the hard work" of the American people to build "such a free and prosperous country."

The group's 26-day visit, sponsored by the U.S. Information Agency's International Visitors Program, included stops in eight U.S. cities. The delegation started its scheduled activities May 14 by meeting with Dr. Gary Weaver of the School of International Service of The American University in Washington.

According to Habibullah Rafi, a member of the visiting group and a senior fellow in the Writer's Union of Free Afghanistan in Peshawar, talking to Dr. Weaver about democracy and democratic principles was "the high point" of the visit. As Rafi put it, "Everybody in the group learned a great deal about what democracy and what the United States are all about".

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Another participant in the program, Hakim Taniwal, explained that during this first visit to the United States he learned that American society is based on the value of "hard work" and that the American people respect "individual rights" a great deal. Taniwal added that when "the work and efforts of individuals are fully respected in a society, this by itself brings mutual recognition of rights among the individuals and creates an atmosphere in which the rights of citizens are protected."

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The group members also explained that after talking to many Americans, especially Blacks, they found that the United States has come a long way in the area of civil rights and the protection of minority rights. They emphasized that the laws in this area are "strictly implemented" and no one can "ignore the civil rights amendments that are attached to the Constitution."<-

According to Habibullah Rafi, "due to Soviet propaganda," when he was in Afghanistan he had the impression that "Blacks, American Indians and other minorities were not considered equals to Whites and they were stripped of their basic rights." But after seeing it for himself "in most cases minorities are treated as equal to Whites and their rights are protected under the U.S. Constitution." He said since Afghanistan also has many minorities, what he learned in the U.S. "will be a good lesson to follow in that country."<-

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Another memorable event in the United States was the group's tour of the U.S. Capitol and meeting with Republican Senator Gordon Humphrey of New Hampshire, a leading supporter of the Afghan resistance. Akram Baba, a member of the delegation said, "I was particularly impressed with the way a high and powerful American like the senator would talk to us so informally and in such a friendly way." Another member of the group, Yusuf Laghmani, said that "The friendliness and hospitality of the American People are the things I will never forget."<-

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The participants in the program also gave high marks to their Philadelphia visit. On the significance of the Philadelphia stop, Rafi, on behalf of his fellow visiting Afghans, said that "After seeing all that history we came to the conclusion that Philadelphia is the political cornerstone of the U.S. and it is the place in which the whole process toward building a democratic nation was initiated." He also said that "For himself, looking at the Liberty Bell was just like looking at the Independence Monument in Kabul." Rafi, who has written more than 60 books on folklore, history and literature in his mother tongue of Pashto, said the visit to Philadelphia strengthened his desire for a free and democratic Afghanistan. He said that he has kept detailed notes on his trip to the U.S. and once he returns to Pakistan he plans to publish them as "short literary and poetic pieces."<-

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Dr. Sima Saman, the director of Malalai Hospital for Afghan Refugees in Cuetta, Pakistan, and the only women member of the group, commented on how good an experience it was for her to see America for the first time and learn something about the American way of life. But she complained to the organizers of the Afghan Visitors Project that in many instances afghan refugee women are not given an equal chance to participate in the visitors program and come to the United States for a tour.

Dr. Sina Samar, the director of Malalai Hospital for Afghan Refugees in Quetta, Pakistan, and the only woman member of the group, commented on how good an experience it was for her to see America for the first time and learn something about the American way of life. But she complained to the organizers of the Afghan Visitors Project that in many instances Afghan refugee women are not given an equal chance to participate in the visitors program and come to the United States for a tour. As she put it, "During my visit to America I learned a great deal about civil rights and minority rights, and I would like to extend the same message about the visitors program, that Afghan minorities and women should be given equal opportunity to participate in the program."<-

Many members of the group emphasized the need to expand the Afghan Visitors Program and argued that since relations and friendships between nations are strengthened more by exchange of ideas and close human contacts, nothing can better serve that purpose than such programs.<-

Besides Washington and Philadelphia, the group traveled to Charlotte, Indianapolis, Omaha, the Grand Canyon, San Diego and New York.<-